WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY THERE ARE THREE *PERSONS* IN GOD?

BY

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Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity![1]

For roughly sixteen centuries, mainstream Christianity has felt comfortable explaining and extoling a God who is one in essence and yet three in person. The sentiment is easily enough expressed, and by Spirit-worked faith it is easily enough accepted. A comprehensive grasp of what such a formulation intends to say, however, is much more elusive.

With such language we are attempting to do the impossible, to describe the indescribable. Our great God is "beyond our understanding" (Job 36:26). Yet careful scrutiny of our words is in order so that we do not by carelessness imply or infer from them something which we should not. It is important to recognize exactly what we mean—and what we do not mean—when we use the word "person" in reference to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The words

That this word is not intended to be used completely in its regular English sense is clear from common usage. When speaking of human beings we customarily substitute the collective "people" for the plural, but we would not do this for the divine persons of the Trinity. "Person," in the context of God, is not completely separate from its secular meaning, but it is being employed in a specialized sacred manner. Gerhard emphatically agrees:

> Here the question arises: Do words taken from the common way of speaking and applied to this mystery retain the same meaning in every respect? We respond. Of course not! Rather, the Church grants them the legal right of her own citizenship and employs them in a special sense.[2]

Persona

The English word "person" has been inherited from the Latin *persona*. The coining of this term is usually credited to Tertullian. The word already had substantial semantic range before it came to him. *Persona* had the sense of a mask worn by actors to designate the different

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[1] *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 195 v. 1.

[2] Johann Gerhard. *Theological Commonplaces: On the Nature of God and on the Trinity: 2*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 300.

characters they played. By a logical transference, the word was also used to refer to these various roles themselves. From this understanding the word expanded to also mean an individual party with respect to Roman law.[3] It is in this last sense in which Tertullian speaks of divine persons. Just as three persons can under law share possession of something, the three persons of the Trinity all share possession of the Godhead.[4] As Beisner summarizes, "Tertullian's language at this point, though not the legal interpretation that attached to it, later had influence in east as well as west."[5] This would remain the standard term in Latin Christianity.

πρόσωπον

A linguistic equivalent to the Latin *persona* was found in the Greek πρόσωπον. The former may be etymologically derived from the latter via the Etruscan language.[6] πρόσωπον was used in this theological context before *persona,* and Tertullian may have adopted his own terminology from Hippolytus's use of πρόσωπον in his *Contra Noetum.*[7] This word has much of the same historical baggage as *persona*. It could mean anything from an actor's mask to an individual. This semantic flexibility made it ill-suited to become the technical eastern term for the Three in God. The sense of mask or role left the word susceptible to a Sabellian misinterpretation.[8] πρόσωπον, however, never was officially rejected.[9] It persisted as "a less technical term" which was "without any philosophical or metaphysical overtones."[10]

ὑπόστασις

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[3] Richard A. Muller. *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*. 1st ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2006), 223.

[4] E. Calvin Beisner. *God in Three Persons*. (Wheaton, IL: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 56.

[5] Beisner, *God in Three Persons,* 56.

[6] William J. Hill. *Three-Personed God: The Trinity As a Mystery of Salvation*. (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 49.

[7] Hill, *Three Personed-God*, 35-36.

[8] R. P. C. Hanson. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381*. (Edinburgh: Baker Academic, 2006), 206-207.

[9] G. L. Prestige. *God in Patristic Thought*. (London: Billing and Sons, Ltd., 1952), 162.

[10] Muller, Dictionary, 251.

The word which would become the standard Greek mode of expression was ὑπόστασις. This noun comes from the verb ὑφίστημι, which in this context means to "subsist, exist."[11] It must be noted here also that the word οὐσία, from εἰμί, eventually came to be used to describe God's single being as one in distinction to the three. In common usage, however, ὑπόστασις was virtually synonymous with οὐσία. Pelikan points out that at the time of the Nicene Creed these terms were still considered to be interchangeable.[12] Decades of further controversy would help the words diverge enough to keep them distinct, even if that distinction is difficult to articulate or maintain.

The word οὐσία was, in its own right, a rather problematic word. In philosophical discussion, οὐσία, "essence," is that which makes a thing what it is. It is a generic concept, an abstraction, not a concrete reality. In this sense we could say that different human persons have a common essence, that of humanity. They all equally fit the definition of human being. If this same abstract use of οὐσία is applied to God, the three persons are then understood to be three gods who all equally fit the definition of being a god. This amounts to tritheism. The proper sense in the context of the Trinity then is not abstract but real: God not as a definition of shared god-ness but as the reality of the shared Godhead. Hanson chronicles how the Cappadocian fathers typically did illustrate the relationship of οὐσία and ὑπόστασις in the Trinity analogically from humanity to deity, but they too recognized that this was of limited benefit.[13]

While the abstract meaning of οὐσία is not the one intended of God, it does help to show what the distinction is between οὐσία and ὑπόστασις. They are not completely interchangeable. οὐσία, as Prestige points out, bears the connotation of quality in a way which ὑπόστασις does not.[14] If the use of these terms were to be reversed, this would imply that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were dissimilar with respect to divine quality. By contrast, ὑπόστασις then implies more the bare fact of existence and, by asserting three of them, no qualitative variation is meant.

Through the work of the Cappadocians, one οὐσία in three ὑποστάσεις became the accepted dogmatic formula in the East. Latin Christianity had to endure less precision. ὑπόστασις

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[11] Henry Scott and George Liddell. *A Greek English Lexicon Liddell Scott*. Edited by Henry Stuart Jones. A new edition, revised. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), § ὑφίστημι.

[12] Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 208, 219.

[13] Hanson, *Search*, 692-737.

[14] Prestige, *God*, 188-190.

would be rendered *substantia* according to etymology (later writers would change that to *subsistentia* to clarify), but this word *substantia* had been used by Tertullian and those after him in a manner functionally equivalent to the Greek οὐσία.[15] This ambiguity, coupled with Latin's relative inability to discuss philosophical concepts,[16] prevented the West from adopting Eastern terms in as many words. Instead, they retained the expression of one *substantia* in three *personae,* importing the concepts of the Greek designations. Aquinas made this importation explicit by defining *persona* as *rem subsistentem in natura divina*.[17]

The ideas

Aquinas was not the only one who attempted to give a definition of the word "person." Many definitions, varying more in style than substance, have been offered. Yet instead of beginning from human constructs, we are better served by starting with Scripture, recognizing that this word "person" merely attempts to express what Scripture sets forth about God as three as opposed to what it sets forth about God as one.[18]

Distinct

Both Jesus in his speech and the holy writers in their text take care not to confuse or blend the various persons. This is seen most clearly in John's Gospel. From the very first verse of his glorious prologue, the personal distinction is carefully maintained.[19] Jesus refers to the

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[15] Muller, *Dictionary*, 223-224.

[16] This is due not to some inherent flaw to the Latin language but to the fact that at this time Latin had less of a history in philosophy than Greek to develop as specialized of vocabulary.

[17] Muller, *Dictionary,* 225.

[18] This paper will assume as having already been sufficiently proven from Scripture the fact that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all God in the proper sense of the word and that there is only one God.

[19] The fact that the final clause of John 1:1 καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος contains no article in front of θεὸς has caused the spilling of countless bottles of ink. Those who argue that θεὸς is to be used in a proper sense assert correctly that predicate nominatives do not require the article in Greek as they do at times in English. Those who improve the argument add that the lack of an article in this instance makes it qualitative, in effect, an adjective, such that the clause could be rendered, "And the Word was Divine," as long as we understand "divine" in its proper sense. However, this still does not answer the question of why the Holy Spirit did not have the apostle use the article and prevent such a squabble from occurring. The answer is seen readily enough if one inserts the article and sees the confusion which results. ὁ θεὸς would invariably be referred back to πρὸς τὸν θεόν, who in this context clearly refers to the Father as opposed to the Son. Asserting that the Word was ὁ θεὸς would lead to a confusing equation

Father as being ἄλλος compared to himself, someone else as opposed to him (Jn 5:32).[20] Jesus also speaks of the Holy Spirit as being an ἄλλον παράκλητον than himself (Jn 14:16). In fact, in this verse all three persons are held distinct from all the others person: The Son asks the Father. The Father gives the Spirit. The Spirit is a paraclete other than the Son. In another instance Jesus identifies himself and the Father as "two witnesses" (Jn 8:17,18). Many passages could be cited with verbs of telling (Jn 12:50) and giving (Jn 6:37) and loving (Jn 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:31; 15:9; 17:23,24,26) and glorifying (Jn 8:54; 13:31,32; 16:14; 17:1,5) and so on being performed by one person to another. These passages would simply become unintelligible if such interactions must be bent so that there is no real distinction between the persons but one only of appearance. Pieper writes, "The names Father, Son, and Holy Ghost can denote only three self-subsisting persons, *drei Ich*. No one who hears these names of God will think of three modes of appearance or three activities of the same person."[21] To Pieper's designation "I's," Hoenecke adds a more philosophical label, "There are really three independent egos."[22]

Even when Jesus claims that he and the Father are one (Jn 10:30), neither context nor grammar would allow this assertion to imply an identity of person between the two. The previous verse states that Jesus has his sheep given to him from the Father, implying a distinction. Furthermore, if such a statement intended to say that the Father and the Son are the same person, there would be no reason to use the neuter ἕν in place of the masculine εἷς. The Father and the

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between the Father and the Son. John omitted the article not to propose an Arian understanding of God but to avoid a potential Sabellian misunderstanding of him.

For example, take the sentence: "Last week Caesar was in Rome. And Caesar was with the consul. And Caesar was the consul." Given such a statement, one would likely conclude that the second clause, "Caesar was with the consul," was merely a case of understatement for effect, as the third clause seems to identify the two. However, if the sentence were to read: "Last week Caesar was in Rome. And Caesar was with the consul. And Caesar was consul," in that case there are no such complications. Given our knowledge of the Roman governmental system we are not surprised to see that there are two who both simultaneous occupy the position of consul and so the speaker neither identifies the two parties nor gives reason to create a secondary class of consulship for Caesar. The same is true in John 1:1. We know from throughout Scripture that there are three who are God, and so this statement carefully preserves this fact while asserting the true divinity of both God and the Word.

[20] Verse 31 makes it clear that the ἄλλος in verse 32 is used by Christ in distinction to his own person. He then brings up John the Baptist, but shows also his relative insignificance in bearing witness to Christ since he is just a man. After the digression to John, he comes to name the one whose testimony is sufficient to verify Jesus, namely, God the Father.

[21] Francis Pieper. *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 383.

[22] Adolf Hoenecke. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Vol. 2 Translated by Richard A. Krause and James Langebartels. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 184.

Son (and the Spirit, although he is not mentioned here explicitly) are one "thing," but not one person.

In the Baptism of Jesus, we are shown diverse and distinct symbols, all individually named and identified, for each of the three persons (Mt 3:16-17; Mk 1:10-11; Lk 3:21-22). This theophany would boil down to nonsense or a deliberate deception if not indicative of a real personal distinction.[23]

Personal

The three persons are all personal and not impersonal. If anyone denies this trait to the Father, he likely denies this to God in general, and such a belief would prove difficult to maintain without rejecting the majority of Scripture. Any questions of whether the Son is personal are erased in the Incarnation.[24] It is the Spirit who has been falsely accused of being an impersonal force the most often.

This charge will not hold up to Scripture, however. In several instances all three persons are named in a succession which implies equality (Mt 28:19; 1 Co 12:4-6; 2 Co 13:14). It would be strange to place an abstract and impersonal spirit on the same footing as the personal God and his personal Son.[25]   Further evidence of the Spirit's personality comes from the personal verbs

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[23] It is important also, however, to not try to make too much out of the clear distinction in this event. Gerhard writes,

> External symbols as sign must be distinguished from persons of the Trinity as signified. Those external symbols—the voice of the Father, the assumed nature of the Son, the form of a dove in which the Holy Spirit revealed himself—are distinguished and separated not only really but also essentially. But the persons of the Trinity who reveal themselves in these external symbols are indeed distinguished really, yet not essentially but only personally, as we gather from all the statements of Scripture that prove the unity of the divine essence. (341)

[24] If someone would make the claim that the Word became personal through the Incarnation, we could point him to statements of Jesus which would sound out of place were that the case, such as, "Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!" (Jn 8:58), and "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (Jn 17:5).

[25] It has been said that to prove the Trinity all one must do is show the divinity of Christ and the personality of the Spirit, as the personality of Christ and the divinity of the Spirit have never been seriously challenged. By placing both Son and Spirit in parallel construction with the Father, these passages effectively demonstrate both. If the Father and the Spirit are divine, so must the Son be also. If the Father and the Son are personal, the same must be true of the Spirit. If anything else were the case, this baptismal commission, in particular, would be as absurd as would a White House decree issued "by order of the President, his son, and his political influence," for the son of a president has none of the constitutional authority of his father and said influence is an abstract entity.

ascribed to him, most obviously in the writings of Luke.[26] These are works characteristic of an intelligent and volitional being.[27]

What accounts for some of this misunderstanding is the neuter gender of the word πνεῦμα. Even when spoken of the third person of the Trinity, the holy writers typically follow the grammatical convention and speak of him with neuter pronouns. This is, however, not without a key exception. On Maundy Thursday, Jesus repeatedly refers to the Holy Spirit with the masculine ἐκεῖνος, as well as referring to him as the παράκλητος, not the παράκλησις, showing him to be rational not irrational, personal not impersonal (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-8, 13-14).[28]

Interrelational

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have a very real relationship between themselves. This is seen from the Scriptural statements already adduced which distinguish them, but even more so by these names themselves. In the great commission, Jesus instructs Baptism to be performed "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).[29] Names are used here which apply not to their relationship with the world but to their relationship with each other.[30] It

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[26] The Holy Spirit reveals (Lk 2:26), leads (2:27; 4:1), descends (3:22), is blasphemed (12:10), teaches (12:12), comes (Ac 1:8; 8:16; 10:44; 11:15; 19:6), speaks (1:16; 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2; 21:11), enables tongues-speaking (2:4); is lied to (5:3), is tested (5:9), is a witness (5:32), is resisted (7:51), carries people off (8:39), encourages (9:31), calls (13:2), sends (13:4), thinks (15:28), prevents (16:6,7), appoints overseers (20:17), compels (20:22), and warns (20:23). And all this is from the writings of just one holy writer and about only the most controversial person.

[27] Pieper relates to all three persons the axioms: *Actiones semper sunt personarum sive suppositorum intelligentium. Opera sunt personis propria* (383).

[28] In passages such as 14:26 and 15:26, any significance to the choice of the masculine pronoun could perhaps be discredited (if we discounted the fact that Paraclete itself is a title for a person, not a thing). Since the name "Holy Spirit" is followed by a neuter relative pronoun, Jesus follows grammatical categories and then uses the masculine demonstrative to tie in with παράκλητος, with which πνεῦμα is in apposition. This cannot so well account for the repeated use of ἐκεῖνος in the first paragraphs of chapter 16. Jesus continues to use the masculine while πνεῦμα is the most recent referent and παράκλητος has not appeared for verses. The consistent agreement with the masculine as opposed to the neuter cannot be coincidental.

[29] Perhaps it is not accidental that one of the fullest expressions of who God is and the interrelationship of the persons of the Trinity come as God puts his own name on an individual through the waters of Baptism.

[30] While there may be some doubt as to the parties with which the first and last of these terms stand in relation, the point of reference for the second is unmistakable. The name "Father" could be construed as a reference to God being the Father of all things and the name "Spirit" related to his connection with our spirit of faith, but Jesus cannot be understood as being the Son in relation to the world in an unqualified way. He could be the Son of Man or the Son of Mary, but not just the Son. Since "Son" must refer to his relationship with the Father, it makes most sense that "Father" refers to his relationship with the Son. It is also the case that we can only truly come to know God the

was also not in common practice for an Old Testament Jew to refer to God as "my Father."[31] Jesus, however, uses this designation repeatedly to express his unique relationship with the first person of the Trinity. His enemies picked up on exactly what this term implied. "For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" (Jn 5:18). "Father" intimated a personal relationship within the Godhead, not the providential blessings enjoyed by a creature. The association between the Father and the Son is most intimate. He is εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς (Jn 1:18).[32] The Spirit is not excluded from this familiarity. Not only is he called the Spirit of God and of Christ (Ro 8:9) but he searches and knows the depths of God (1 Co 2:10). These three persons stand in a real relationship with one another.

Whole Divine

The three persons of the Trinity, while there is a real distinction between them, each possess wholly the whole Godhead. It is not divided into three parts. Paul writes, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col 2:9). Jesus has the totality of divinity. He himself claims this by saying, "All that belongs to the Father is mine" (Jn 16:15). Yet Jesus reserves for himself no divine prerogatives in distinction to the Father, saying a little later, "All I have is yours and all you have is mine" (Jn 17:10). There is nothing of divinity which they do not each possess. The same is true of the Spirit. We gather this primarily from the preceding passages. For since we have already been led to understand the equality of the Spirit with the

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Father as a father through the Son (Jn 14:6,7). As these first two are designations of an inner Trinitarian relationship, we look to see how the third could be so as well. Frequently the Holy Spirit is referred to in the Old Testament as רוּחַ יהוה , "the Spirit of the Lord," an expression adopted by the New Testament on occasion. Jesus also uses the idea of breathing out in connection with his sending forth of the Spirit (Jn 20:22). One of the meanings of πνεῦμα is "breath," and so by this action Jesus is stating that his relationship to the Spirit is one of "spiration." In view of these other passages, as well as those in which the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus or of Christ (Ac 16:7; Ro 8:9,11; Gal 4:6; Php 1:19; 1 Pe 1:11), Spirit is best taken here as a personal designation relative to the other persons in God and only in a secondary or derived sense in relation with mankind.

[31] Even in the New Testament, we see "our Father" but not "my Father" when the referent is Christians and not Christ.

[32] NIV renders this with a paraphrase: "in closest relationship with the Father."

Father and the Son, we conclude that the Holy Spirit likewise possesses all the Godhead. Paul's equating of the Holy Spirit with the Lord also implies as much (2 Co 3:17).[33]

All three persons possess the entire divinity. Their distinctions from another, the internal distinguishing marks, must not be thought of as extra traits or accidental qualities which combine with the essence to form the individual persons. Or perhaps more simply, we could say that the following equations are not correct:

$$God + Fatherhood = God\ the\ Father$$
$$God + Sonship = God\ the\ Son$$
$$God + Spirithood = God\ the\ Spirit$$

Were this to be true, the simplicity of God would be compromised, and with that his infinity and absolute independence as well. Such a formulation would then also be faced with the question of where the intellect and will and energy of God are located. If they are located in God as God, then these added accidents are either extensions to an infinite being or they must be redefined to fit a modalist construct. If they are located in Father as Father, Son as Son, and Spirit as Spirit, then the divine essence is of itself without intellect, will, energy, and so on, if it is to even be anything more than an abstract definition. Furthermore, as these persons are distinct, this would mean that God, considering all three persons, must of necessity have three intellects, three wills, and three energies, for even if between the persons these would be identical with one another they could not be numerically identified with one another.[34] In effect, the Trinity would be comparable to a monster such as Cerberus,[35] one divine body moved by three independently thinking, feeling, willing, moving heads.

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[33] The previous verse uses the word κύριον without an article. This then is to be understood as a proper name. Perhaps meant as the rendering of the Tetragrammaton popularized by the Septuagint, it at the very least indicates, as Blass-Debrunner-Funk writes, a being "of which there is only one of a kind" (§254), which would have to be the capital "L" Lord. In this next verse, not only does κύριος have the article but πνεῦμά does as well. This effectually makes them interchangeable as subjects. If the Holy Spirit only had a portion of the Godhead, it would seem strange to assert that the Lord is the Spirit, entirely identifying the two of them. Consider how unusual it would have been for Paul to say, "This leg is my friend, Luke," or for Joseph of Arimathea to say, "My friend Nicodemus is the Sanhedrin." Such equations are more fitting the whole and not just a part.

[34] English lacks the words to well express the difference between the ideas of two things which are the same in the sense that every quality which the one has is also had by the other and of something being the very one in a numeric sense. Compare: "Those two boys are wearing the same shirt right now" with "That boy is wearing the same shirt he wore yesterday." As is frequently the case, German has the ability to express a concept or distinction which exists as an idea in the English mind but not as readily in the English faculty of speech. "Gleich" expresses that different items are 100% similar but not the same entity. "Selbe" expresses that the two terms or items mentioned denote really one thing.

[35] Michael Servetus (d. 1553), burned in Geneva as a heretic for his anti-trinitarian views, did make just such a comparison to discredit the Trinity.

Person and Essence

From this, then, it becomes apparent that there is needed much more subtlety, or rather, precision, to the distinction between the concept of person and the concept of essence. This precision is first offered by Aquinas,[36] whose point Quenstedt advances most skillfully:

> A person in God is distinguished in one way from the divine essence, in another way from another person; from the former not in reality, but in thought with a basis in reality; but from the latter in actual reality, although in trying to understand this every function of the human mind comes to a halt.[37]

Since there is nothing of the divine essence which each of the persons do not have as their own and since they have nothing in addition to this, there is no real difference between the two. There are scriptural statements which could not properly be made if this were not the case. Jesus, addressing his Father in his great high priestly prayer, says, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God" (Jn 17:3). This exclusive identification with Deity is not exclusive to the Father, however. Jude refers to Jesus Christ as our only master and Lord (4).[38] Since each of these persons is all of God and no more (could there be anything more than an infinite God?), they can each be identified with the divine essence as the only God. Luther comments, "It is not the function of reason to inquire in what manner the Person differs from the Deity itself; not even the angels understand this mystery. In fact, to assume some kind of distinction is a dangerous procedure and must be avoided because each Person is the entire and the very God."[39]

The distinction between the words "person" and "essence," then, is a logical one. In reality there is no difference, and yet the distinction is not artificial. In God there really is both trinity and unity, threeness and oneness, and both must be maintained. Yet there is nothing which can be said of a divine person as such[40] which cannot be said of the divine essence and nothing can be said of the divine essence as such which cannot be said of a divine person.

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[36] Muller, *Dictionary*, 225.

[37] Johann Andreas Quenstedt. *Theologia didactico-polemica.* (Wittenberg, 1685), I, 414, n. 9.

[38] Note how in the following verses the Lord is credited with Old Testament deliverance. This is far more than just a term of respect.

[39] Martin Luther. *Disputationes duae de unitate essentiae divinae et de distinction personarum in divinitate*, (1545, Luther's Works: St. Louis Edition, X:178), translated in Pieper, *Dogmatics*, 398.

[40] By "as such" I mean according to their common status as One of the Three in God and their shared definition of "person." Included then would not be those personal marks (to be touched on with extreme brevity in the next

Personal marks

The distinctive marks which distinguish the persons are not any feature in addition to deity but are really their relationships with each other within God.[41] The Father begets the Son through whom he also breathes the Spirit. The distinction between persons is completely true. They each exist in relation with and in distinction with each other. They all fully possess the identical Godhead but they possess it in different ways.[42]

Definition of "Person"

Having examined the specific aspects of this issue of personality, we are ready to attempt a compilation of a definition of "person." This will perhaps be the most depressing part of this entire paper, for at this point it must be confessed that all of our circling around the issue has not really told us any more than that there are Three who are God and yet God is One. All that has really been accomplished is the surgical removal of various misconceptions which invariably occur as the mind seeks to rationalize the super-rational.

A divine person is God, and all of God, and yet is not either of the other divine persons, even though that person is also all of God. And the same can be said of the third person in distinction to each of the first two. Everything which can be predicated of God can be entirely predicated of any given person of God, and yet predicating it of multiple persons does not multiply the predicate. The same is true for divine existence. There are three who exist but only one existing.[43] These persons all stand in real relation to each other. A person is one who is the one God in distinction to another who is the same one God.

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section) which belong to only one of the persons and whose peculiarities therefore are outside the general definition of a person "as such."

[41] Gregory of Nazianzus is to be credited with first articulating this explanation in a satisfactory manner (Gonzalez, 313-314).

[42] The import of and distinctions between these distinctive marks is really beyond the scope of this paper. For our purpose here it is enough to recognize that these personal marks do distinguish the persons in a real way without dividing the essence of God or adding to it.

[43] Strikingly, in the Hebrew Old Testament, an apparently plural word for God is typically followed by a singular verb. Three subjects, but just one predicate.

The fact that the rhetorical wheels are spinning demonstrates that we have come to the foundation of the issue. But this is no more thorough or redundant than the Athanasian Creed:

> What the Father is, so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit.
> The Father is uncreated, the Son uncreated, the Holy Spirit uncreated;
> The Father is infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite;
> The Father is eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal;
> > Yet there are not three who are eternal, but there is one who is eternal,
> > Just as they are not three who are uncreated, nor three who are infinite,
> > but there is one who is uncreated and one who is infinite.[44]

The creed continues in much the same vein, discussing also the relationship between the persons. Even for a creed it is rather wordy, but perhaps no better definition for "person" has ever been made than this exposition of the faith. For the sake of practicality[45] and to conform to a more proper dictionary style, in the context of the Trinity we will work with this definition of person:

> *A person is a real, rational, and existent individual standing in an actual relation and genuine distinction with other such persons, all of whom individually possess all the being, attributes, and actions of their shared deity together in a numerically singular way.*

Admittedly, this definition is still rather long, yet it does ward off interpretations which can plague those which are more concise.[46] Augustana adopts the time-honored definition *quod proprie subsistit*, rendering it also "das selbst besteht."[47,48] Meyer proposes for person the description, "center of self-consciousness and self-determination."[49] It is clear what both of these definitions are trying to express. They mean to assert the reality and the individuality of the persons. Meyer adds the important concept of rationality by the reference to "consciousness" and "determination" and further implies the important concept of the interrelationship of the persons through the word "self." On these merits, his definition has much to its credit. However, neither

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[44] *Christian Worship,* p. 132.

[45] Imagine responding to the question of what a person is by reciting the Athanasian Creed. It would be much more burdensome than the answer they may have desired. Its impressive length kept me from quoting the entire first half of it word for word even in this paper which is all about this topic.

[46] Another failing of this definition is that it only has use in defining person in the very specific context of Trinitarian discussion. It is too narrow and nuanced to be applied without substantial modification to a human person or in the area of Christology to the dual-natured person of Christ, but the purpose of this paper is not the word "person" in general but the word "person" specific to the Trinity.

[47] *Concordia Triglotta.* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), AC I:4.

[48] Hoenecke interprets this phrase as "that which has a special existence independent of others" (182).

[49] John P. Meyer. "The Holy Trinity." In Lange, Lyle W. ; Albrecht, G. Jerome. *Our Great Heritage*. Volume 1. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), 532

his definition nor Augustana's well wards off the idea of a partitioning in God. Meyer's words, beyond simply not excluding it, could even directly give the false impression of a subtle tritheism. It could be misconstrued as implying that the three persons each have a separate knowledge and a separate will for a sum total in God of three. In this case their unity would be limited to quality or action. (In Meyer's defense, he himself was well aware of the potential pitfalls of his expression and immediately addressed them: "But even so we must be careful not to carry any idea of plurality [of knowledge or of will] into the essence of God.")[50] To clarify the issue, we could speak of God's so-called communicable attributes in a similar way to which the Athanasian Creed speaks of his so-called incommunicable attributes:

> The Father has divine power, the Son divine power, the Holy Spirit divine power;
> the Father has divine knowledge, the Son divine knowledge, the Holy Spirit divine knowledge;
> the Father has a divine will, the Son a divine will, the Holy Spirit a divine will;
>> yet there are not three divine powers, but there is one divine power,
>> just as there are not three divine knowledges, nor three divine wills,
>> but there is one divine knowledge and one divine will.[51]

We close this portion of the study with Chemnitz's extended elaboration of the word "person":

> A person is an individual substance, intelligent, incommunicable, which is not sustained in something else or by something else. A person is something which is not fabricated and not a lifeless thought; it is also not some accidental, changeable thing which clings to some other essence. It is not a portion or fragment of something. Rather it is something with a real substance, alive, not something divided into many, but single and rational, not something that is bound or held by something else. It has a unified nature.[52]

Evaluation

Now that it is established what we mean by "person," it is fair to examine how aptly "person" means just that. As has already been mentioned, the original risk with the Latin word *persona* was that it could be understood as referring to a mask or a role and not something

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[50] Meyer, "Trinity," 532-533.

[51] Even this formulation, however, is still subject to a possible misunderstanding. Knowledge and will could both be misconstrued in an objective sense, designating that which is known and that which is willed. In this case, the Triune God's one knowledge and will could be falsely thought of as analogous to the thinking and the resolve of three people who all know and will the same thing by separate mental operations. Knowledge and will must here be understood in a subjective sense, referring to the act of knowing and the act of willing.

[52] Martin Chemnitz. *Chemnitz's Works: Loci Theologici I*. Translated by Jacob A. O. Preus. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 102.

objectively real. That danger no longer inheres to the English word "person."[53] Our modern use of the word "person" is one which denotes a real, independent existence. This aspect of the term fits well the specialized sense in which we wish to employ it.

Perhaps the greatest benefit offered by "person" for our purposes is the implication of rationality. We use the word "person" for intelligent beings like humans but not for those which are incapable of rational thought and emotion, such as animals or inanimate objects. This is a fitting connotation to transfer, for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all are rational beings. The word "person" further implies interpersonal relationships, which there really are between the persons of the Trinity.

For all these benefits, there are some doctrinal dangers lurking in this word. Unintended ideas can be consciously or unconsciously transferred from the everyday use of the word to its specialized ecclesiastical use. Since human persons are entirely separate from each other, the word could lead us to make divisions within God. This error would likely first reach realization concerning God's intellect and will. Hoenecke addresses the issue:

> "Person" is generally understood as having independent knowing and willing. Applied in that way to the Trinity, the concept of "person" could include establishing three knowings and willings. But more accurately considered, knowing and willing do not constitute the individuality or the ego but are really its manifestation. Consequently we can say that in the one divine essence there are really three independent egos, each of which participates in the one indivisible knowing and willing of the one divine essence.[54]

The problem in this case is not so much what "person" means but what it implies. Awareness of this limitation, instead of being used as an excuse to jettison the terminology, should be used to safeguard against giving false impressions.

This danger from the word "person," however, is significantly compounded by the dangers of the word "essence." In this discussion, essence is to be understood not as an abstraction but as an objective reality—God himself and not the definition of God or some similar God-material. By the analogy of human persons who share a human essence, the terminology we commonly employ could be used to conceive of God as three separate and unconnected persons who all completely meet the definition and the prerequisites of being a god,

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[53] This Sabellian equivocation would, however, remain with the English word "persona."

[54] Hoenecke, *Dogmatics,* 184.

tantamount to tritheism.[55] This threat persists even if the word "essence" is not used. The separateness of persons might grow to such a strength as to threaten the unity of God. God is then imagined to be not a simple unity but an aggregate of persons in the way that people could be knit together in close association. The Godhead would be severed and replaced by three detached persons who join together to form a rather exclusive club, the "God-club," to act together as a corporation.[56]

All things considered, "person" remains an effective way to communicate what God is as three. With potential problems marked as a precaution, the term persists as beneficial for its specialized church usage.

Alternatives

Could there be better words for what we are trying to say? Since the word "person" is not itself mandated in Scripture we would be free to use another if a better word were found. If the meaning has become unclear enough so as to warrant a modification or if heresy has successfully infiltrated the terminology so as to necessitate clarification, we would most definitely advocate such a change. This is not presently the case, however, and so even if a better vehicle of expression can be found to communicate the concept intended by "person," we would be foolish to disrespect the tradition of sixteen centuries, to give the appearance of sectarianism, and to offend the simple believers for the sake of arcane novelty. Therefore, in discussing the possibility of better alternatives to "person," we do this only for the sake of exercise and to provide other words which can be used to explain the one which is hallowed by church use.

One word which we actually could do without in this context is "essence." The same is true for "substance." The Greeks had to use οὐσία outside of its most natural semantic range to keep the unity of God from being only generic. "Essence" suffers from just that problem. We frequently use it as an abstraction, implying little more than the word "definition" or we use it

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[55] This danger has always existed, and the Cappadocians' use of human persons of the same essence to illustrate divine persons of the same essence only exaggerated it. They did show, however, that they did this only as an illustration and did not themselves hold any such polytheistic notions (Hanson, 692-737).

[56] An opposite but equally devastating consequence of presenting God as such is that it leads those who are rightly troubled by the fact that monotheism has been assaulted to find solace in modalism. An example would be McGrath. He rightly expresses horror at the idea of God being a "committee somewhere in the sky" (120) and soon finds himself in blatant modalism (130-131).

more akin to the word "quality." Here is one of the rare occasions where English seems to be able to make a finer distinction than the more philosophically developed Greek. We have the word "being," which is not only etymologically parallel to οὐσία, but it is not as easily subject to the dangers of being taken abstractly instead of as referring to God himself. "Substance," from the Latin *substantia*, is even worse than "essence," as it imports concepts of materiality and corporeality into God so that it could be thought that the "God-stuff" is merely transfused equally between three persons.[57, 58] Since this word "essence" is used with much less frequency in this context (often it is just said that God is one God in three persons and "essence" is passed over in silence),[59] perhaps making "being" the primary word by which we express God's unity would not be so troublesome, if the transition were even noticed at all.

Concerning the concept of "person," we could fall back on Pieper's expression of "*drei Ich*," or "three I's,"[60] but the expression "One God in three I's" does not seem to work as an official and technical formula. Hoenecke's word "ego" would serve more precisely,[61] but it would to many imply a selfishness in God between the persons, an idea in complete contradiction with their mutual love.

Seeking to express the Trinity's interpersonal relationship, we might wish to use a word like "relation," but relation can be understood in two senses, either someone that is related or how someone is related. The latter is the way it is most likely to be understood in English ears, which would reek of Sabellianism no matter how great the attempts would be to deny it.[62] For

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[57] It appears that this was already a conceptual problem with *substantia* going back as far as Tertullian. Hill writes, "Tertullian views this [threeness] idiosyncratically, as something akin to rarefied (spiritual) matter. God 'stretches himself out,' one might almost say, into Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Tertullian's own examples are those of root, stem, and fruit, or source, river, and stream" (35).

[58] With these come the question of the Fourth Century shibboleths "homoousious" and "consubstantial." In daily speech we might do best to retain their sense without the words themselves in the same way as does the translation of the Nicene Creed used in Christian Worship: "of one being." While it says much more than most who originally signed the Nicene Creed likely thought (many of them seemed to have envisioned homoousious as meaning of an identical but not the selfsame being), it is true and clearer. A term like consubstantial also becomes confusing when it is used to refer both to Christ's divinity and his humanity, because the term cannot be true in precisely the same sense in both cases. Clearer might be to emphasize the maxim "100% true God and 100% true man."

[59] However, words such as divinity and deity can fall prey to this same issue of whether we mean them as abstractions or in reference to the thing itself.

[60] Pieper, *Dogmatics,* 383.

[61] Hoenecke, *Dogmatics,* 184.

[62] This would be akin to the neo-modalism of Rahner. He considers himself to have solved the problem of the Trinity, but his is only a subtler form of Sabellianism. He has moved those modes from outside of God to inside of God and thinks he has the support of the Cappadocians. He fails to recognize, however, that there is a difference

the former we might then suggest "relatives," which would even allude to the specific relationship between the Father and the Son, but this term would also fall victim to every misconception to which "person" is susceptible, likely to a more severe degree.

"Self"

What we seek, then, is a word which captures the interrelationship of these three I's. One word which might work is "self." As pertains to God, there are three selves in one being. This seems to capture well that they are real and that they are in a relationship with one another just as "person" does. Jesus can say of himself "I" as opposed to the Father "you" and the Spirit "him." This term would seem most likely to refer to rational beings, and since it is less susceptible to being distorted by our concept of a human person, it would be less likely than "person" to lead to a division into three knowledges and wills or fall into outright tritheism.

"Exister"

The previous term fits more closely with the Latin *persona.* This next possibility is more closely connected with the Greek ὑπόστασις. Translating by etymology, a ὑπόστασις is one who subsists. "Subsist," however, is not a word in common English usage and so for most minds it is far too malleable to use as a technical term. People could all confess it and mean a dozen different things because not one of them can nail down the actual meaning of the word. In English, we might do better with "exist."[63] To make it a noun, we would make up the word, "exister."[64] Like οὐσία and ὑπόστασις, "being" and "exister" are semantically near, holding out

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between a person and his personal marks. His persons, or "direct manners of subsisting" (110), are entirely impersonal in an overzealous attempt to protect God from having three knowledges, wills, or actions. To this Gerhard would respond,

> All this must be explained correctly, however, lest we take it exclusively, understanding hypostasis to be only a manner of subsisting. For hypostasis is one thing, the manner of hypostasis another, just as a person is one thing and a personal property another. Hypostasis, person, is the divine essence itself distinguished with a certain hypostatic character and distinct from the others by its own mode of subsisting. (315)

[63] This is not all that different from the German "bestehen" which was used for it in the German of the Augsburg confession (I:4).

[64] This artificial word does seem to have been used occasionally in philosophical circles with the meaning "one who exists," but for practical purposes, the word would be brand new.

for us this apparent contradiction instead of trying to solve it. There are three who exist as one being. One being, three existers. These words also preserve the distinct connotations of οὐσία and ὑπόστασις, [65] with "being" implying unity and quality and "exister" expressing more the fact of existence. The personal ending "-er" implies some degree of a personal intelligent subject.

Conclusion

After chasing our tails for this many pages, we are left with the conclusion that, for all its insinuatory faults and linguistic limitations, "person" is a good word to express the Threeness of God. Confident in its specialized sense, cognizant of its pitfalls, and perhaps equipped with complementary terms, we can correctly teach what God has revealed to us about himself "without mixing the persons or dividing the divine being"[66] and praise him as the Three in One.

> *Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!*
> *All thy works shall praise thy name in earth and sky and sea.*
> *Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,*
> *God in three persons, blessed Trinity!*[67]

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[65] See the section on ὑπόστασις above for this discussion.

[66] *Christian Worship*, p. 132.

[67] *Christian Worship*, 195 v. 4.

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